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Contribution of Jürgen Habermas in Contrast to the First Generation of Frankfurt School of Thought

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Abstract

Initial generation of Frankfurt School of Thought put forth social critique of modernity and capitalism and how they justify their supremacy over nations and people. Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor W. Adorno, Erich Fromm, and Walter Benjamin are chief proponents of this theory. It is noteworthy how this movement started in Germany during WWII and spreads around the world in 1930s. Conflict theorists interpreted various philosophers' ideas, especially those of, Karl Marx, Hegel, and Sigmund Freud etc. They dismissed rationality because it can lead to violence and barbarianism if logically justified. The mythological battle of troy, the horrors of holocaust are all examples of how rationality is capable of mass destruction.[1] By 1970s another generation, started by Jürgen Habermas, initiated the dialogue between continental and analytics tradition. Contrary to the first generation, he did not believe in pessimist understanding of reason and tried to re-establish it without falling in the pit of objectivism. The foremost section is based on a brief biography of Jürgen Habermas. The later section of the paper enumerates a comparative analysis to see how Habermas perspective on modernity and rationality are different from the first generation of Frankfurt school of thought. The third and fourth section was reserved for the detailed discussion and critique of his ideas. Lastly, the paper asserted as to whether Habermas relevance in the 21st century outweighs his predecessors or not.

Keywords: Frankfurt School, Conflict Theory, Theory of Communicative Action, Public Sphere, Rationality, modernity

A Brief Biography of Jürgen Habermas

Jürgen Habermas (1929-present) is a German philosopher and sociologist renowned for his critical theory and pragmatism. He is one of the leading figures in the second generation of Frankfurt School of Critical theory.[2]

[1]"Jürgen Habermas," *New World Encyclopaedia*. June 15, 2018. https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/J%C3%BCrgen_Habermas (accessed December 6, 2019).

[2]Claudio Corradetti, "The Frankfurt School and Critical Theory," *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (2005), https://iep.utm.edu/frankfur/ (accessed December 3, 2022).

In 1944, he was recruited in Hitler's Nazi Youth regime which left a huge impact on him as to how they have been living in corrupt and deplorable political system.[3] He was not only disappointed in German government but also German academics[4] for not identifying the atrocities committed in the war. He joined Institute of Social research, where he worked as an assistant for Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969). Meanwhile Habermas studied philosophy and sociology along with writing short pieces. However, Horkheimer (1895-1973) felt his essays were too revolutionary so he asked Adorno to dismiss him. Hence Habermas completed his dissertation and left the institute; thereby rejoining it as a head and professor of philosophy and sociology in 1964.[5]

Apart from the first generation of Frankfurt school, he was also influenced by Georg W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), Karl Marx (1818-1883), John Dewey (1859-1952), Talcott Parson (1902-1979), G.H. Mead (1863-1931), Max Weber (1864-1920), Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998) and C. S. Pierce (1839-1914). This was probably the reason behind his complex literary works that comprised of variety of subjects such as epistemology, language, politics, communication, philosophy, theology and sociology.[6] Among these works, his theory of Communicative Action is the crux of his lifelong study and achievements.

2. Contrasting Habermas Ideas from His Predecessors

The first generation of Frankfurt School proposed a critique of domination that includes culture industry, consumerism and authoritarianism. They key generation contributors contributed significantly in different domains: Adorno and Horkheimer contributed in philosophy,[7] Eric Fromm (1900-1980) in Psychology;[8] Marcuse (1898-1979) and Friedrich Pollock (1894-1970) in Sociology and Politics; Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Leo Löwenthal (1900-1993) in medial and culture respectively. To comprehend that what makes Jürgen Habermas unique from his predecessors, let's compare and contrast their perspectives.

Table 1. Contrast between First and Second Generation of Frankfurt School

Aspects	First Generation of Frankfurt School of Thought	Second Generation of Frankfurt School of Thought
Modernity and Enlightenment	First generation often regarded modernism and Enlightenment as a precursor to oppression, domination and authoritarianism.[9]	Although, second generation do accept the shortcomings of modernity yet Habermas did not rejected it altogether. he

[3]Max Cherem, "Jürgen Habermas," *Internet Encyclopaedia* (2005), https://iep.utm.edu/habermas/#H1 (accessed November 17, 2019).

[4]He wrote letters to Heidegger for not criticizing National Socialism in his book *Introduction to Metaphysics.*

[5]Max Cherem, "Jürgen Habermas," *Internet Encyclopaedia* (2005), https://iep.utm.edu/habermas/#H1 (accessed November 17, 2019).

[6]James Bohman, and William Rehg, "Jürgen Habermas," *Stanford Encycliopaedia of Philosophy,* May 17, 2007. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/habermas/ (accessed November 19, 2019).

[7]Adorno (1903-1969) is renowned for his concept of 'culture industry' whereas Horkheimer was the eminent figure in developing Critical Theory.

[8]Eric Fromm explored link between Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Karl Marx (1818-1883)

[9]Gerhard Richter, "Introduction," in Gerhard Richter (ed.), *Language Without Soil: Adorno and Late Philosophical Modernity* (New York, NY, 2009; online edn, Fordham Scholarship Online, 10 Mar. 2011), https://doi.org/10.5422/fso/9780823231263.003.0001,

Aspects	First Generation of Frankfurt School of Thought	Second Generation of Frankfurt School of Thought
		called modernity as an unfinished project.[10] So, instead he argued that it can have potential if modernity can be redefined through communication.[11]
Rationality	Proponents of first generation emphasized greatly on Instrumental reasoning.[12]	Habermas on the other hand, distinguished between constructive and destructive form of rationality: instrumental and communicative.[13] He perceives language and dialogues as liberating.[14]
Politics	They are skeptical and critical about democracy, liberal capitalism and consumer society.[15]	It was mostly reformative and democratic in nature. Habermas advocated that deliberative democracy inclusive of rational debate is foundational for politics.[16]
Media and Culture	According to Adorno and Hockheimer mass media manipulates, mislead and pacifies society.[17] This produced fascism, authoritarianism and manipulative mass culture.[18] In addition, Marcuse believes that one-dimensional	Habermas emphasized that public sphere opens the possibility for critical debate and democratic participation through dialogues.[21] Likewise, communicative rationality can

[10]Jürgen Habermas, *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Edited by Maurizio Passerin D'entrèves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge, Mass: Mit Press, 1997).

[11]Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures,* trans., Frederick Lawrence, (UK: MIT Press, 1990).

[12]Theoder W. Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1944).

[13]Instrumental reasoning refers to using reason merely as a tool rather than in its innate quality; whereas communicative rationality refers to mutual understanding

[14]Charles Lemert, and Anthony Elliot, *Introduction to Contemporary Social Theory* (Newyork: Routledge, 2014).

[15]Herbert Marcuse, however, favored radical opposition like student movements and counter-culture. See (Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: The Ideology of Industrial Society* (London: Sphere Books, 1964); and Bohdana Kurylo, "Technologised Consumer Culture: The Adorno–Benjamin Debate and the Reverse Side of Politicisation," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 20 (4), (2018): 146954051877381. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540518773819.

[16]Jürgen Habermas, and Steven Seidman, *Jürgen Habermas on Society and Politics- A Reader* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

[17]Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment.*

[18]Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment.*

[21]Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [Cambridge Polity, 1989 (1962)].

Aspects	First Generation of Frankfurt School of Thought	Second Generation of Frankfurt School of Thought
	culture suppresses dissent and gives society a fake sense of freedom.[19] Additionally, technology and consumerism has so deeply infused people into capitalism that suppresses any sort of revolution and critical thought.[20]	stimulate and strengthen democracy, freedom and mutual understanding.[22]
Outlook/ Perspective	They are pessimists who regarded society as hopelessly bleak and dominated by capitalism, authoritarianism and mass culture.[23]	Habermas' ideology, on the contrary, is optimistic and constructive in nature. He particularly commends that democratic dialogue can liberate societies.[24]
Ethics and Morality	The first generation was engrossed in their critique of ideology and domination that they either ignored or failed to provide any systematic framework for moral consensus.	Habermas formulated discourse ethics where actions are morally valid only if the participants in a rational dialogue can agree upon it.[25]

It is self-evident from the table that Habermas shifted Critical Theory from cultural pessimism to democratic optimism. While the first generation critically perceives domination by reason and culture, Habermas founds a mid-way to emancipation through communicative action, Public Sphere and deliberative democracy. To look more deeply in his thought lets discuss Habermas key ideas in the next section.

3. Key Ideas of Jürgen Habermas

3.1. Democratization of Society_ A Revised Social Critical Theory

Habermas' interests are in politics, language and analytics. Hence, major themes of his social theory comprised of language, communication and rationality.[26] According to him, "language is

[19]Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: The Ideology of Industrial Society*.

[20]Bohdana Kurylo, "Technologised Consumer Culture: The Adorno–Benjamin Debate," 146954051877381.

[22]Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [Cambridge Polity, (1962) 1989].

[23]Dustin Garlitz, and Joseph Zompetti, "Critical Theory as Post-Marxism: The Frankfurt School and Beyond," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 55 (2), (2021): 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.1876669

[24]Jürgen Habermas, *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*.

[25]Jürgen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," In *Ethics: Contemporary Readings*, edited by Harry J. Gensler, Earl W Spurgin, and James Swindal (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[26]Charles Lemert, and Anthony Elliot, *Introduction to Contemporary Social Theory* (Newyork: Routledge, 2014), 257.

always oriented by and towards mutual agreements and consensus."[27] This communicative dialogue can make one recognize political agendas like freedom, responsibility and equality.[28]

3.2. Social System and Life-World

Habermas argued that knowledge of science and social progress is directed by three main tenets, namely, technical, practical and emancipatory (liberation or freedom).[29] Similarly, the idea of society can be comprehended in two grounds:

- Structuralist ground and
- Phenomenological ground

Structurally, society is a self-regulative body governing itself without the intervention of its members. This is a holistic perspective, therefore, it views society as a whole. Whereas phenomenologically, society is conceived as a field where its members can communicate with each other and work together.[30] Habermas termed this field as 'life-world' (a term already used by Heidegger and Husserl which means world that lived before analytics.[31] This perspective upholds a vigorous linkage between field and members within.[32] The existence of any society, according to Habermas, is possible by harmonizing these two grounds that is both system and life world. He accused modern society, technology and bureaucracy for suppressing life-world (through alienation and colonization.[33] Capitalism and stronger social systems have isolated humans by exercising control over societies. Hence Habermas tried to restore supremacy of practical reason of life-world over functional reason of systems[34] by proposing Communicative Action theory.

3.3. Theory of Communicative Action

Theory of Communicative Action revolves around kinship between philosophy and social sciences.

> Habermas develops a two-level social theory that includes an analysis of communicative rationality, the rational potential built into everyday speech, on the one hand; and a theory of modern society and modernization, on the other. On the basis of this theory, Habermas hopes to be able to assess the gains and losses of modernization and to overcome its one-sided version of rationalization.[35]

Through this two level theory Habermas analyzed that modern day capitalism is using rationality as an instrument. He resolved issues of functional rationalization by emphasizing that practical rationality of life-world is superior to functional rationality.[36] According to his communicative rationality, members participating necessitate truth within communication.

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[27]Lemert and Elliot, *Introduction to Contemporary Social Theory,* 258.

[28]Lemert and Elliot, *Introduction to Contemporary Social Theory,* 258.

[29]Max Cherem, "Jürgen Habermas," *Internet Encyclopaedia* (2005), https://iep.utm.edu/habermas/#H1 (accessed November 17, 2019).

[30]"Jürgen Habermas," *New World Encyclopaedia,* June 15, 2018. https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/J%C3%BCrgen_Habermas (accessed December 6, 2019).

[31]"Life World," *New World Encyclopaedia.* July 6, 2018. https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Life-world (accessed August 8, 2020).

[32]"Jürgen Habermas," *New World Encyclopaedia,* June 15, 2018. https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/J%C3%BCrgen_Habermas (accessed December 6, 2019).

[33]Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (London: Polity Press, 1991). (original 1976).

[34]"Jürgen Habermas," *New World Encyclopaedia.* June 15, 2018.

[35]James Bohman, and William Rehg, "Jürgen Habermas," *Stanford Encycliopaedia of Philosophy.*

[36]Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society.*

> His essential idea is that any statement about the world raises three validity claims: that the claim makes sense and is true, that the claim is sincere, and that there is a performative appropriateness to the saying of it. From this idea, Habermas derives a theory of truth defined as rational agreement through communicative dialogue.[37]

So instead of making rationality objective, he made it part of the communication itself terming it as a social power.[38] "This communicative rationality should replace the power of the social system in the forms of political institutions (i.e., the nation) and the capitalist economy."[39]

3.4. Development and Decline of Public Sphere

Habermas was frustrated and disappointed at German philosophers for not being able to criticize *National Socialism* he inclined towards Anglo- American's pragmatism and democratic approaches.[40] He tried to apply rationality to analyze contemporary society.[41] In his 1962 publication *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* he analyzed how communicative rationality has evolved over time.[42] He further elaborated the historical account of bourgeois[43] public sphere from Greek era to modern times (18th century).[44] He explained how private sphere is merged with public spheres to engage in socio-political critical debates. However, commercialization of mass media and other public spheres soon began with the emergence of capitalism.[45] The state has been merged into the society so much that its public sphere is subdued.[46] However, Habermas is positive that public sphere can be revived once functional rationality of capitalism is over-ridden.

3.5. Discourse Ethics

Habermas developed discourse ethics in accordance with his other ideas stating that moral norms ought to be based on the consensus of all the participants who entered in a rational discussion.[47] This correlates with his notion of democracy where fairness is achieved with deliberative rationality (i.e., everyone having a voice in decision making). Furthermore, this ethical notion of a procedural and dialogical process is another block that fits into Habermas broader communicative framework.

4. Critical Appreciation

Jürgen Habermas role in the second generation of Frankfurt School of thought is commendable as he had revised and extended the Critical Theory beyond the pessimism of his predecessors. He can be highly appreciated for his open opposition of powerful social systems like post-WWII and American war against Iraq in 2003_ which was a perfect example of how social powers and

[37]Lemert and Elliot, *Introduction to Contemporary Social Theory,* 282.
[38]Lemert and Elliot, *Introduction to Contemporary Social Theory,* 5.
[39]"Jürgen Habermas," *New World Encyclopaedia,* June 15, 2018.
[40]James Bohman, and William Rehg, "Jürgen Habermas," *Stanford Encycliopaedia of Philosophy.*
[41]See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society.*
[42]See "Jürgen Habermas," *New World Encyclopaedia,* https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/J%C3%BCrgen_Habermas (accessed December 6, 2019).
[43]Bourgeois often refers to tradition, conservative or middle class.
[44]Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.*
[45]Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.*
[46]Lemert and Elliot, *Introduction to Contemporary Social Theory,* 260.
[47]Jürgen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," In *Ethics: Contemporary Readings.*

capitalism can legitimate reason for evil pursuits.[48] Despite condemning capitalism, his optimism for reviving rationality is a commendable solution instead of post-structuralism and Marxism.

4.1. Journalistic Freedom

However, he received a wide range of criticism on his views of Public Sphere many citing it as outdated as media have gained freedom to communicate. John B. Thompson pointed this criticism.[49] However, this criticism can be over-ruled as Habermas has lived almost a century and his notions of public sphere were among his first concepts. Also, in majority of under-developed and developing countries media is not a free as Thompson believed.

4.2. Neglect of Power Play and Over-Optimism about Rational Communication

Habermas is strongly criticized for his implicit presupposition of mutual agreement and truth in language and speech in his Communicative Action Theory. It literally failed to explain how sensitive issues like gender inequalities, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and religious conflict can be mutually agreed upon.[50] Also, according to his Discourse Ethics, if participants agreed upon morally bad actions they can still be validated. For e.g. blatant wrongs like Gaza killings can be condoned because Israelis and Americans mutually had consensus through rational dialogue. Seyla Benhabib argued that Habermas gave an idealistic picture of public sphere where all voices are heard, whereas in reality marginalized groups are excluded.[51] And even if they are included, in practice, power-relations, ideologies and structural inequalities shape communication where the participants do not enter a dialogue as equals.[52] Michel Foucault, in similar vein, criticized that Habermas failed to take into account how power operates within rational conversations.[53]

4.3. Idealized Public Sphere and Anti-Feminist

In addition, a feminist Nancy Fraser criticized that Habermas' social system and life-world were gender-neutral as he didn't take gender inequalities into account.[54] According to her, no matter whether a woman belongs to public or private sphere, she is always dominated by men. Although, this criticism doesn't entails that Habermas notions were indeed incorrect; yet it does highlights the unexplored area of social changes in both public and private spheres.[55] Likewise, a historian Geoffrey Eley also criticized Habermas Public Sphere as universally unacceptable and

[48]Jürgen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," In *Ethics: Contemporary Readings*, 265.

[49]J. N. Kaufmann, "John B. Thompson and David Held, (Eds.), Habermas: Critical Debates," *Philosophy in Review* 2 (6), (1982): 299–304. https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/pir/article/view/11138

[50]Kaufmann, "John B. Thompson and David Held," 275.

[51]Seyla Benhabib, "The Embattled Public Sphere: Hannah Arendt, Juergen Habermas and Beyond," *Theoria* 44 (90), (1997): 1–24. https://doi.org/10.3167/th.1997.449002.

[52]Benhabib, "The Embattled Public Sphere: Hannah Arendt, Juergen Habermas and Beyond," 1-24.

[53]It is to be noted that Foucault (1926-1984) did not directly criticized Habermas, but his philosophical theories stands in contrast to Habermas views. See Bent Flyvbjerg, "Habermas and Foucault: Thinkers for Civil Society?" *The British Journal of Sociology* 49 (2) (1998): 210-233. https://doi.org/10.2307/591310

[54]Kaufmann, "John B. Thompson and David Held," 268.

[55]Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25 (25/26), (1990): 57. https://doi.org/10.2307/466240

was not inclusive. Since the public sphere was romanticized and largely consists of males, whites and bourgeois.[56] Thus, it made his notion of Public Sphere elitist and exclusionary.

4.4. Abstraction and Universalism

Habermas relied quite heavily on rational arguments and believed that universal norms can be achieved via applying rational discourse. Critics asserted that by failing to take into account cultural diversity, differences and plurality Habermas incorrectly assumed that everyone can agree on same sets of principles. Postmodernists and poststructuralists like Lyotard and Jacques Derrida claimed that attaining one such universal rational consensus is impossible amidst diverse and fragmented societies.[57] Furthermore, critics also believed that his theories are too abstract and complex to apply in mainstream politics.[58]

4.5. De-radicalized Critical Theory

Moreover, Marxist critics argued that he de-radicalized and watered-down Critical Theory by shifting it from class struggle and economic critique to communication and democracy. Consequentially, he shifted from revolutionary change stressed by the first generation of Frankfurt School to reformist liberal democracy. This garnered him wide acceptance in academia but also made him less radical compared to his predecessors.[59]

Regardless of criticisms, Habermas contributions to Contemporary Critical Theory are considered as most refined that spans over 50 years. He himself has responded to these criticisms by maintaining that his theories provide normative framework and standards to critique domination and guide democracy. He also sought to update his Critical theory for late 20th century to defend criticisms proposed by feminists, abstraction etc. Despite criticism, he is the living legend of second generation of Frankfurt School who has influenced several contemporary sociologists and philosophers including Thomas A. McCarthy (1940-to date), Axel Honneth (1949- to date), Hans Joas (1948-to date), Claus Offe (1940-to date) and Klaus Eder (1939- to date).

5. Relevance of Habermas in Contrast to his Predecessors

The relevance of Habermas outweighs his predecessors because of his constructive outlook to repair fractured modernity and democracy. This entails that amidst globalization and digitalization in the world; we can neither disfavor nor can out rightly reject democracy and the ever-increasing mass culture.[60] Therefore, unlike pessimist approach of first generation Frankfurt School, Habermas provides constructive and optimistic tools that may serve as practical guidelines for institutions, laws and politics. These guidelines are applicable in modern era as follow:

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[56]Geoffrey Eley, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," (1990), https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/51184; Lincoln Dahlberg, "The Habermasian Public Sphere: Taking Difference Seriously?" *Theory and Society* 34 (2), (2005): 111–36. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-005-0155-z.

[57]Richard Rorty, Emilia Steuerman, "Review of *Habermas vs Lyotard: Modernity vs Postmodernity?"* In *Judging Lyotard*, ed., Andrew E. Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1992).

[58]Douglas Kellner, "Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention," In *Perspectives on Habaermas*, ed., Hahn, Lewis Edwin (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 256-283.

[59]Lincoln Dahlberg, "The Habermasian Public Sphere: Taking Difference Seriously? 111–36. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-005-0155-z.

[60]John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, and Jonas Berge, "Does Democracy Matter?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 25 (1), (2022): 357–75. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-060820-060910.

- By utilizing his discourse ethics, communicative action and deliberative democracy, Habermas built a normative framework that encompass his predecessors. This framework enables that communication is crucial in the formulation of constitutions, EU integration, human rights discourse, judicial systems and climate governance.
- In digital age and Artificial Intelligence era, Habermas communicative Action creates a space for discussion regarding digital ethics, freedom of speech and global democracy. In addition, it also helps to address digital age crisis like media manipulation and misinformation etc.[61]
- In an interlinked world, the rapid global crisis (like pandemics, climatic change, migration etc.) calls for adopting Habermas transnational dialogue and communicative ethics to ensure global cooperation.

In closing, Habermas is garnered among the most influential contemporary thinker who has bridge philosophy, political theory and sociology. He breaks free from pessimism of the first generation of Frankfurt School; and reconstructed a Critical Theory that is more constructive and optimistic, making it more relevant for modern democratic societies. He also offered a hopeful alternative to both postmodern relativism and authoritarian ideologies, thereby, philosophy, politics and sociology into a coherent vision. Therefore, his relevance to this day is unmatchable with his predecessors who focused on critique of cultures.

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[61]Pieter Boeder, "Habermas' Heritage: The Future of the Public Sphere in the Network Society," *First Monday* 10 (9), (2005). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v10i9.1280.

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